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WILDLIFE SERVICES—TEXAS

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USDA Resolves Wildlife Conflicts in Texas

Every day, residents, industries, organizations, and agencies call on Texas Wildlife Services (WS) for expertise in protecting agricultural, industrial and natural resources, as well as the public's health, safety and property from damage or threats posed by wildlife. Managed by professional wildlife biologists, WS responds with effective, selective, and humane strategies to resolve wildlife conflicts.

Texas is a diverse mix of urban and suburban areas, agricultural lands, forest and desert environments, and is also home to nearly 20 million people. Texas ranks first with more farms and farm acreage than any other State in the Nation. At the same time, Texas has 23 cities with populations of 100,000 or more. The State also has a remarkably diverse range of wildlife species. This combination of wildlife and man and their associated conflicts makes the Texas WS program the largest wildlife damage management program in the United States. Each year the agency provides service to more than 6,000 properties on 20 million acres. The agency serves rural and urban areas with technical assistance, education, and direct assistance in wildlife damage management. With \$80 million in annual resource losses to wildlife, the program's importance continues to grow.

WS helps reduce the risk of wildlife-borne diseases being transmit-

Top 5 Major Assistance Activities:

- Protecting public health and safety from rabies epizootics
- Protecting livestock, exotics, and wildlife from predation
- Protecting homeowners from small mammals and bird damage
- Protecting agricultural crops and livestock from feral hog damage
- Protecting crops, timber, rangeland, dikes, impoundments, and property from beaver damage

Top 5 WS Research Projects of Interest to Texas:

- Managing problems caused by vultures
- Managing feral hog populations
- Controlling canine, gray fox, and skunk rabies through oral rabies vaccination
- Protecting timber and forest resources, roadways, dams, and other property from beaver damage
- Managing livestock and wildlife predation



ted to humans and livestock; manages birds and animals that threaten human safety; and protects facilities, structures, and other properties from damage by rodents, birds, and other wildlife. Crops, timber, and rangeland are also protected from wildlife damage as are producers who lose cattle, sheep, goats, and other livestock to wildlife predators.

Applying Science & Expertise to Wildlife Challenges

WS offers information, advice, equipment, and materials that enable many people to resolve wildlife conflicts on their own. Often, this *technical assistance* can be provided over the phone. WS also provides on-site expertise, or *direct assistance*, to manage complex wildlife problems that cannot be safely resolved by others. To support this effort, WS conducts *scientific research* across the Nation to develop answers to new problems posed by wildlife and to ensure the program benefits from the latest science and technology.

Protecting Public Health and Safety—Two canine rabies epidemics emerged in Texas in 1988, one involving coyotes and dogs in South Texas and the other in gray foxes in West/Central Texas. In 1994, the public health threat created by these two expanding epizootics prompted the Governor of Texas to declare rabies a public health emergency in the State. In February 1995, the Texas Department of Health initiated a cooperative program known as the Oral Rabies Vaccination Program (ORVP). Texas WS is a major contributor to this program, helping to distribute millions of oral baits by plane every year. The goal of the program is to create zones of vaccinated coyotes and gray foxes, and the project is proving to be highly successful. To date, no cases of canine rabies have

been reported north of the South Texas drop-zone for coyotes. There have also been no cases of canine rabies reported in South Texas since September 7, 1999, with the exception of one case in the Laredo area, which originated in Mexico. Additionally, there have been no cases of gray fox rabies reported beyond the boundaries of the original ORVP drop-zone for gray foxes.

Protecting Livestock from Predators—Historically, the Texas livestock industry has suffered livestock losses to predators. In 1996, sheep and goat losses from predation exceeded \$10.5 million according to the National Agricultural Statistical Service, and this was with a livestock protection program in place. If no management program were in place, research suggests losses could be two to three times higher. These predator related losses represent direct costs to the producer (i.e., value of the lost animal or value of lost wool and mohair), but other losses are also felt by the producers, including the future value of associated animal products. The local rural economy also feels these losses indirectly through the reduced buying power of the ranchers and farmers. Research has indicated cost benefit ratios of 1:4 and 1:7 for wildlife damage management activities conducted by WS to protect the sheep and goat industry.

Protecting Crops, Timber, Rangeland, and Other Property—WS continues to implement extensive measures in Texas to manage damage to property and various natural resources caused by the activities of beaver. The beaver’s burrowing activities weaken earthen dams, highway foundations, dikes, and railroad track beds. Their dam building activities cause roadways, pastures, crops, and timber lands to flood by blocking water systems and plugging culverts. Their feeding activities result in the loss of trees and shrubs in urban, suburban, and rural situations and cause the destruction of water structures such as docks, piers, and house boats. In Texas, WS activities to manage beaver damage have been greatly enhanced since 1995, as the number of requests for assistance with beavers has risen sharply.

Looking to the Future

Feral hogs cause damage to field crops such as corn, milo, rice, watermelon, peanuts, hay, turf, wheat, and other grains by their feeding, trampling, and rooting activities. They also prey on lambs, kids, fawns, and ground nesting birds and compete with deer and turkey for limited resources such as mast and forage. Their rooting



and wallowing activities damage pastures, spoil watering holes and generally weaken riparian habitats. They are destructive to livestock fences and may damage livestock and game feeders, consuming waste feed and mineral and protein blocks. Feral hogs are also a concern as a potential reservoir for numerous diseases and parasites. Populations of feral hogs in Texas exceed one million, and their range continues to expand to every part of the State.

Damage caused by several migratory bird species has also significantly increased in recent years. Cattle egrets, black and turkey vultures, and double-crested cormorants, each roost and congregate in numbers that become more than just a nuisance due to odor and noise. They create public health hazards, prey on livestock and aquaculture, damage and reduce the value of property, kill trees, and require costly cleanup operations. Increased demands on WS biologists, however, have taxed the program’s ability to respond to these additional wildlife damage management assignments.

Texas Wildlife Services Funding

In addition to receiving federally allocated funds, WS also receives money from cooperators; such as producers; private individuals; businesses; and other Federal, State, and local government agencies who have a vested interest in the program. In most cases, these cooperators need help to resolve wildlife damage problems or they play a role in wildlife damage management.

